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# Meaning Created by the Language of Geoffrey Hill's Poetry

> All discourse is realized as event but understood as meaning [. . .] The word is always the bearer of the "emergent meaning" which specific contexts confer upon it.
> (Ricoeur 1994: 167)

All discourse is produced as an event, says Paul Ricoeur. Poetic discourse is realized as a particular kind of event because its understanding as meaning is extremely complex, going beyond "specific contexts." The reading of the lines of poetry is tantamount to the opening of new vistas of experience, leading the reader to a better self-understanding or even self-building, even though every reader can perceive the same text differently and the author is also just one of the readers at best.[1] The range of the meanings of a text is bound to grow in time due to the expansion and extension of the interconnected numbers of its interpretations in the process of reading.

The present paper pursues the theme of the multiple layers of meanings in Geoffrey Hill's poetry and its aim is to offer an assessment of the presence and role of the postmodern manner of writing which penetrates the basically neo-modernist texture of his poems. The following lines that come from his latest volume – "don't wreck a good phrase simply to boost sense" (Hill 2006: 27) or "the eternal falsity of poetry is that its events occur in a time that differs from reality" (Hill 2006: 44) – remind us of the familiar concept of "simulacrum," developed and presented by Jean Baudrillard.[2] Therefore, we should not be surprised that the modernist lines of Geoffrey Hill tend to carry a number of postmodern ideas and influences, especially when his later poetry is concerned. Indeterminacy of the meaning of some of his poetic lines seems to have been intentional: the reader has been left more work to do and more scope to cover to interpret those intricate and ambiguous lines.

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[1] "What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; verbal meaning and mental meaning have different destinies" (Ricoeur 1994: 91).

[2] "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true. Ecclesiastes" (Baudrillard 1983: 1).

Language is the stuff that any poem is made of, but Geoffrey Hill's language is unusually complex and ambiguous. The search for meanings in this kind of poetry forces the reader to plunge into myth, history, technical innovations practised by the poet, and into the etymological layers of the English language. The influences coming from the reading of other European poets, such as Paul Celan or Lope de Vega, for example, are helpful in the search for the meanings of Hill's mysterious and elusive poetry. The meanings of the poem can be discovered by the perspicacious reader as well as created by the poem itself. The dialogue between the reader and the poetic text is unavoidable and new shades of meanings are destined to be born in the process. Geoffrey Hill has always been conscious of the voluble character of the poetic text and he has also been constantly striving for the perfection and for the victory over the "inertia of language" (Hill 1984: 2)

In his essay, entitled "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement,'" Hill presents a very ambiguous linkage between the perfection of the sense of language and the moral exigencies that some poets succumb to. Referring to Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, he remarks, "There is a sense in which the modern artist is called upon to atone for his own illiberal pride and a sense in which he is engaged in a vicarious expiation for the pride of the culture which itself rejects him" (Hill 1984: 4). "Empirical guilt" that poets experience is referred to as a writer's attempt to make "a vicarious atonement for other writers' sins of commission and omission" (Hill 1984: 13). Hill seems to be torn between the moral and technical demands set by his sense of cultural and historical responsibility. On the one hand, while speaking about T. S. Eliot, for example, Hill (1984: 13) stresses the "indefinite extent" of language to which the poet was forced to surrender "and seek his focus there." The symbolist stress laid on the perfection of form plays a very significant role in Hill's view of literature. On the other hand, the older emphasis placed on moral responsibility of a poet is equally powerfully emphasized by him.[3]

The conflict endured in the shameless world, that is, in a society of "aggregates and items" (Hill 1984: 18) lays a double duty on a poet, in Hill's opinion. The feelings of attrition, contrition, shame and fear are bound to go hand in

[3] "However much and however rightly we protest against the vanity of supposing it to be merely the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,' poetic utterance is nonetheless an utterance of the self, the self demanding to be loved, demanding love in the form of recognition and 'absolution' [...] This dismay is as nothing compared to the shocking encounter with 'empirical guilt,' not as a manageable hypothesis, bust as irredeemable error in the very substance and texture of his craft and pride" (Hill 1984: 17).

hand with the growing demand for perfecting the poet's mastery over the language.[4] The ambiguity and verbal difficulty of Geoffrey Hill's writing present a daunting task to any researcher. The consolation is that the task is endless and inexhaustible, which means that the search for the elucidation of the poems can always be expanded and enlarged upon by the future researchers.

In his first collection of poems, titled *For the Unfallen* (1959) Geoffrey Hill introduces his principal poetic themes, which are those of myth, religion, fascination with nature, with the monuments of the past and the creation of words. The multiple meanings of the poems seem to emerge from the words themselves. The first poem of the collection, significantly titled "Genesis," enlarges upon an act of creation. It is not very clear whether the created object is the world or the poem. It is equally unclear whether the creator is God or the poet who just introduces himself as being the one "crying the miracles of God" (Hill 1994: 3). The paradise presented in the poem seems to be the paradise produced by the language.

Biblical themes of innocence and guilt are also treated in a very contradictory manner in the famous poem "Holy Thursday," fashioned after William Blake's two poems, bearing the same title and presented respectively in his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. As the influence of Blake's poems on Geoffrey Hill has been thoroughly analysed in numerous critical studies, including that of Andrew Michael Roberts, carried out from the angle of history and politics, I would merely like to stress the verbal contradictions present in Hill's poem – the contradictions conspicuous also in all of his oeuvre. Terror and consolation seem to form an inseparable unity in Hill's "Holy Thursday" where we read that "Child and nurse walk hand in glove." Such a union of the opposites is also expressed in the following lines in the poem:

> Lo, she lies gentle and innocent of desire
> Who was my constant myth and terror. (Hill 1994: 7)

The poem "God's Little Mountain" continues the paradoxical and contradictory themes of the creation of the world as we know it in parallel with the world of language. The poet complains that he continually "waited for the word that was not given" (Hill 1994: 6) until he reached the ambiguous state of which he speaks at the end of the poem:

[4] "The major caveat which I would enter against a theological view of literature is that, too often, it is not theology at all, but merely a restatement of the neo-Symbolist mystique celebrating verbal mastery" (Hill 1984: 17).

I [. . .] fell, until I found the world again
Now I lack grace to tell what I have seen;
For though the head frames words the tongue has none.
And who will prove the surgeon to this stone? (Hill 1994: 6)

In one of Geoffrey Hill's finest collections of poems entitled *Tenebrae* (1978) the poet continues presenting the tension between the transcendental search for God and bodily love. Passion permeates all the poems, and we can admire the poet's "neo-Symbolist mystique celebrating verbal mastery" (Hill 1984: 17). Closed neo-symbolist structures, where one image adumbrates another, and in this manner creates a circle of interlaced ranges of meaning, are varied and intertwined with open multifaceted post-modern structures whose meanings are unsheltered, and which seem to be waiting for the reader to recreate them anew. It is only very gradually that readers can succeed in entering into a dialogue with the text, and the intended meanings still remain very ambiguous. For example, the following lines from the poem "Tenebrae":

Possessed by you I chose to have no choice,
Fulfilled in you I sought no further quest, (Hill 1994: 160)

leave the readers puzzled with the multiple meanings. Who is the addressee of those lines – God or a mortal beloved? Further lines, highlighted by the image of "your cross," bring some clarity into the inherent multiplicity of meanings. However, the tension between the adjectives "passionate" and "passionless" suggests a different, though barely potential, range of meanings, namely, that of the unfulfilled bodily love:

As I am passionate so you with pain
Turn my desire; as you seem passionless
So I recoil from all that I would gain,
Wounding myself upon forgetfulness,
False ecstasies, which you in truth sustain
As you sustain each item of your cross. (Hill 1994: 160)

The epithets "passionate" and "passionless" are joined through their opposition in the above quoted lines. Once they have been mentioned, both of them perform their interdependent roles in the poem, that is, both of them work together, suggesting each other through their mutual negation.

In the fifth part of the collection *Lachrimae*, titled "Pavana Dolorosa," the play of the words, which formally seem to deny each other's presence, creates a new presence which is even more forceful, more mysterious and leading

to a frightful conclusion in the end. The line "self-seeking hunter of forms" clearly defines the endless aims and pursuits of the poet, whereas the paradoxes inherent in the oxymoronic phrases such as "your silence is an ecstasy of sound" (Hill 1994: 137) culminating in the final three lines:

> And your nocturnals blaze upon the day.
> I founder in desire for things unfound.
> I stay amid the things that will not stay. (Hill 1994: 137)

hint at the paradoxical nature of all creation, divine as well as human. The other phrases, such as "Ash-Wednesday feasts," "ascetic opulence," "music's creation of the moveless dance," etc., are no longer able to surprise us. They are the expressions of the new world, created by Geoffrey Hill, which nevertheless expands our perception of the paradoxical nature of the world that we inhabit.

Andrew Michael Roberts compares Hill's "Pavana Dolorosa" with Robert Southwell's "Saint Peter's Complaint." The historical note has been sounded, and the unfortunate martyr of the Elizabethan England has received his poetical return in Geoffrey Hill's oeuvre, the more so that the epigraph marking the whole collection of *Lachrimae or Seven Tears Figured in Seven Passionate Pavanes* has also been taken from Robert Southwell's poem "Marie Magdalen's Funeral Teares," published in 1591. In his poem, though, Geoffrey Hill seems to doubt the possible "joys" of the "self-wounding martyrdom" leading to "fictive consonance," whereas the "self-seeking hunter of forms," that is the poet, knows that "there is no end to his pursuits" (Hill 1994: 137). Poetry is thus given the priority of significance in Geoffrey Hill's poetry; religious imagery has just emerged as a constituent part of the poet's paradoxical language, which seems to create its own religious dimensions. But when, for example, we read the following lines from "Genesis":

> At dawn the Mass
> Burgeons from stone
> A Jesse tree
> of resurrection (Hill 1994: 127)

we are confronting the problem of whether the enigmatic language does not assert the omnipotence of religious presence. The language itself seems to create "ghosts for love" on "forlorn altars" (Hill 1994: 127).

In a truly postmodernist manner, Geoffrey Hill is capable of subjecting real feelings to the demands of language, where language clearly gains the priority over all else in the newly created universe of poetry. For example, in "Coplas,"

which forms a part of the poem "The Songbook of Sebastian Arruruz," where the eponymous Arruruz is also the invented name of an invented poet, we read the following lines: The metaphor holds; is a snug house.

> You are outside, lost somewhere. I find myself
> Devouring verses of stranger passion
> And exile. The exact words
> Are fed into my blank hunger for you. (Hill 1994: 84)

"The metaphor, verses of stranger passion" as well as "the exact words" seem to hold dominion over the real feelings which, in a good postmodern fashion, are not supposed to make stuff and substance of poetry. The poet "like a disciplined scholar" is trying

> To find value
> In a bleak skill, as in the thing restored:
> The long-lost words of choice and valediction. (Hill 1994: 80)

The only thing which seems to be truly real are metaphors and language itself.

The collection of poems, significantly titled *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983), is dedicated to the life and death of the French poet Charles Péguy, born in 1873 and killed in battle in 1914. The themes of history, war, myth and religion get intertwined, and all of them are viewed from the vantage point of poetry. Memory dominates the verbal scenes of battle and death on the fields of France. "In memory of these things these words were born" is the final utterance of the Charles Péguy cycle.

The first poem of the cycle comments on the murder of the French socialist deputy Jean Jaurés. Geoffrey Hill parallels the ghost of the French deputy with that of Caesar. Indirectly, Péguy is compared with Brutus. The fatal question, though, which Hill asks is the following:

> Did Péguy kill Jaurés? Did he incite
> The assassin? (Hill 1994: 165)

Hill raises the question of whether the people, especially poets, are answerable for their inciting words; in this case, the words would be those pertaining to Péguy's criticism of Jaurés. The question is reminiscent of the self-rebuke which W. B. Yeats addressed towards himself in his poem "The Man and the Echo:" "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" (Yeats 1991: 221). In both cases, the questions are rhetorical. In Hill's poem, the poet

is urged to "defend your first position to the last word" (1994: 166), where the word takes priority over any military positions.

As Charles Péguy is known to have been a follower of Bergson in his acceptance of the principles of organicism and criticism of the possibilities of technical and mechanical advancement, which would turn an individual into a cog of the machine or a number among the masses, Geoffrey Hill celebrates Charles Péguy's response to Bergson's ideas and links the French philosopher with

> an army
> Of poets, converts, vine-dressers, men skilled
> In wood or metal, peasants from the Beauce,
> Terse teachers of Latin and those unschooled
> In all but such hard rudiments of grace. (Hill 1994: 168)

The privilege given to poets, aristocracy and individual craftsmen is very similar to W. B. Yeats' urging the poets of the future to "[s]ing the peasantry and then / Hard riding country gentlemen (1991: 211). Hill knows very well that words may have many meanings, that "history is law, clad in our skins of silver, steel and hide" (Hill 1994: 173) and that

> Counting our blessings, honestly admire
> The wrath of the peacemakers, for example
> Christ driving the money-changers from the temple,
> Applaud the Roman steadiness under fire (Hill 1994: 173)

we perceive that "the metaphors of blood begin to flow" (Hill 1994: 174), while poetry becomes more important than real blood.

The play of words creates new ranges of meaning, all of them challenging our perspicacity as readers. The farce of history is played out against "the last rites of truth, or the Last Judgement [. . .] or Mercy" (Hill 1994: 179), all of which are presented as being much the same in Hill's poetry.

The sentencing of Dreyfus is paralleled with "the world-famous stories of Jules Verne" or the scenes at Golgotha. In both instances:

> Serenely the mob howls
> Its silent mouthings hammered into scrolls
> Torn from Apocalypse. (Hill 1994: 173)

The religious dimension given to the famous trial of the 19th century demonstrates the archetypal character both of the events and of the mob, which are

always able to hit the expected note while searching for a scapegoat. It is through his mastery over the language that Geoffrey Hill distances himself from all those "we," famous in history and represented by "Pilate, Caiaphas in his thin soutane and Judas" (Hill 1994: 173).

The historical figures of Péguy or Jaurés or even Dreyfus acquire a new reality in the poetry of Geoffrey Hill. Historical judgement should be left for the historians to attain. The poetical work accommodates history only to the extent which permits the poet to create an absolutely new world based on the historical circumstances. However, the play of language, the polysemy of words, the twisted and ambiguous usages of idioms bring all these events into our present world, and make us perceive them all anew and very differently. Hill's mastery over the language implies his mastery over the historical events, which gain a new life in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*. Still, while contradicting R. C. Nettleship's utilitarian and business-like approach towards language, Geoffrey Hill insists that "there is something 'mysterious', some 'dark and disputed matter' implicated in the nature of language itself" (Hill 1984: 151).

In his latest volume of poems, *Without Title*, Geoffrey Hill continues to pursue the mysterious trends of language as such. Paradoxes amalgamate and clash, creating in this manner new and still unexplored ranges of meaning. Even memory becomes suspect. "Men of stale will" may continue "nursing their secret wounds," but the author knows that the man ruled by the mob, that is "the mob-ruled" may have only "five seconds' freedom." "The work of mourning [. . .] bugles dead achievements" and therefore, when viewed against the exigencies and expectations posed by the mob-ruled:

> Metaphysics remain
> In common language something of a joke.
> Mourning my meaning is what I meant to say. (Hill 2006: 14)

In our age, the existence of meaning itself is threatened and that is why meaning may become simply a cliché unless it is created by poetry. The mourning for the meaning, absent or present, creates meaning. "Symbol burns off reality" (Hill 2006: 12), we read in another poem, and symbol always indicates the search for meanings as well as for ideas. It is not in vain that one of the poems is paradoxically titled "On the Reality of the Symbol."

Aware of the threats to meaning, Geoffrey Hill still connects poetry with moral and ethical demands. Justice still is one of his favourite words. Although the poet knows that "[s]o few of us absolved when what we write / Sets us to

rights on some scale of justice" (Hill 2006: 26), he still insists that he may be just "a whiz at ordinary language" (Hill 2006: 25) and, consequently, people may often mishear him, but the demands of his art are the same. More than ever does he see "through a painter's eyes" and more than ever does his desire to "stay immortal and ageless" (Hill 2006: 3) get delegated to the sphere of the dream. His only consolation remains that "dead friends are no remoter than in life" (Hill 2006: 3).

Since one of the concerns of the present paper, as has been mentioned at the beginning, is the neo-modernist connection in Hill's poetry, it seems appropriate at this point to mention links and parallels, necessarily limited here to a couple of examples for reasons of space, with the work of modernist poets, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Those links and parallels find their direct and indirect reflection particularly in Hill's latest volume of poetry.

In his essay, significantly titled "Our Word is Our Bond," which is included in the collection of *The Lords of Limit*, Hill writes about Ezra Pound as well as a number of other poets, writers and philosophers. Hill does not justify Ezra Pound's political delusions but still he goes back to Pound's trial and finds it more paradoxical than any paradox itself.[5]

What is of more interest, however, for the present paper, relates to Hill's comments on Pound setting high demands for the definitive character of language as such and Hill's criticism of Pound's inaccuracy in the latter's translations of Propertius. To recall what T. S. Eliot said as regards Pound's poem "Homage to Sextus Propertius" seems important at this place: "It is not a translation, it is a paraphrase, or still more truly (for the instructed) a persona" (Eliot 1991: xxiii). Geoffrey Hill, on the other hand, comments on Ezra Pound conflating two lines of Propertius' Latin because "the major implications of the change certainly involve a claim to status, to be 'among' the true poets" (Hill 1984: 156). In short, by creating his personas, including that of Sextus Propertius, Ezra Pound seems to have been fighting his own battles directed against what he thought to be the narrow-mindedness of his entourage in England, in 1917. His poem abounds in numerous classical names and references, helping the poet to emphasize the principal subject of the poem, which is poetry and the autonomy of the poet. The poem ends on a very fragmentary Modernist note, leaving a possibility for the reader to connect very disparate images.

[5] "At the same time, 'the peculiar legal paradox' that, as a result of the court's verdict, 'Pound found himself, in effect, under a sentence of life imprisonment despite the fact that he was innocent in the eyes of the law' is in itself more oxymoronic than paradoxical" (Hill 1984: 154).

Geoffrey Hill's poem "Ex Propertio," on the other hand, is very different in character. To begin with, it is a short poem, in contrast to Ezra Pound's text being of a substantial length and volume. In this poem, Hill seems to be trying to fathom out his life-long themes of love and law, and to link them as well as to separate them through rhetoric and poetry:

> I bowelled my loyalties to law and love
> Rhetorical in parts. (Hill 2006: 61)

Hill's poem opens on an ironical note reminiscent of literary traditions pertaining both to W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot:

> Encouraged by a glib-tongued haruspex
> To practice divination – what's wrong there? (Hill 2006: 61)

The lines are reminiscent of the denunciatory opening of T. S. Eliot's fifth part of *East Coker*:

> To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits,
> To report the behaviour of the sea monster,
> Describe the horoscope, haruspicate and scry. (Eliot 1991: 198)

Eliot links the above mentioned occupations with the playing of cards and calls them "pastimes and drugs," especially if they get contrasted with the far worthier and further searching poetical endeavours, such as

> To apprehend
> The point of intersection of the timeless
> With time. (Eliot 1991: 198)

Geoffrey Hill, on the other hand, asserts the reviving power of love over that of the self-consuming law:

> Love as a necromant
> Re-infiltrates the dead whilst law usurps
> Upon itself. (Hill 2006: 61)

Both poets clearly mistrust "divinations charms."

Whereas Pound writes of Propertius' love for Cynthia, Hill stresses that "the act of love surpasses eloquence" (Hill 2006: 61). All the three poets nevertheless unequivocally proclaim their absolute faith in the powers of the poetical language. Hill speaks of this in these very impressive lines which are his homage to the potential of the language:

Words are never stone
Except in their appearance. See me out,
Long-domiciled epiphanies I trust. (Hill 2006: 64)

These lines coming from the poem "On the Sophoclean Moment in English Poetry" can be clearly perceived as Geoffrey Hill's creative motto. The meanings of the long-domiciled epiphanies are created by and revealed through words.

Geoffrey Hill is extremely skilful, aptly playing with the similarities and differences offered by poetical language. The poet appears to be certain that there is but "one stop from Sophocles to Sepulchre" (Hill 2006: 64). However, although the Sophoclean Moment may last only for a moment (Hill 2006: 64), the attempt to become Sophoclean will always be there.

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